

Making ends meet as a Smallholder

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(A transcription of an article published in the Journal of the Wiltshire Family History Society (January 2006, Issue 100) about life at Ashdown Farm in East Sussex, England between 1921 and 1958)

My paternal grandfather, William Lambourne, was born in Ramsbury in Wiltshire in 1879. He left school at the age of ten to work as a plough boy and later made his way to London where he was employed in a variety of occupations and where he met and married my grandmother, Annie Maria Davies. Immediately prior to World War I he took up employment as a gardener at Little Common in East Sussex. He then volunteered for service on the Western Front, where he unfortunately sustained serious leg injuries which incapacitated him for some time.

He eventually recovered and in 1921 took over the tenancy of Ashdown Farm house and approximately eight acres of land in what were then the rural outskirts of Hastings. He established himself principally as a market gardener, but also kept pigs, chickens and, during the years of World War II, rabbits. He marketed the majority of his produce on vegetable rounds in nearby St.Leonards-on-Sea. He remained at Ashdown until 1958 when the land was acquired for housing development.

He kept detailed financial records throughout the thirty-seven years of his tenancy and those for 1939 through to 1958 have survived and remain in the Family's archive. These accounts provide a fascinating insight into smallholding in southern England in a period which includes both World War II and the austere years that followed it.

My grandfather and grandmother brought up their family in the farm house, which never benefited from electricity or indoor sanitation. They later divided the property so that my father, who was also named William, and his wife, Miriam (nee Smith), could bring up theirs. My father, who was born in 1918, spent his working life in the business as well. (I have written more fully of the various family members connected with Ashdown and of the conditions at the farm house in *The Lambournes of Ashdown Farm, St.Leonards-on-Sea*, copies of which are held in both the Wiltshire Local Studies Library and the archive of the Wiltshire Family History Society.)

Members of the family were staunch Methodists and there can be little doubt that the business endured because it was underpinned by those values which came to be associated with non-conformists: sobriety, thrift, frugality, industry and self-discipline. Certainly the accounts are a testimony to prudent financial management.

My grandfather had started the business with a loan from the local Council,

believed to have been of about £100. The final payment of this, £5 4s 2d, was made on 26 August 1940. However, only in the last two of the years covered by the surviving accounts did the business not maintain a credit balance, a balance which generally grew year on year.

Even in 1948, when a Ferguson grey tractor, together with a trailer and other accessories, was purchased at a cost of £408 10s 9d, the business ended the year in credit. The same was true for 1956, during which approximately eleven acres of land were purchased at a cost of £876 15s 0d including legal fees, in order to enable the business to continue after the family would have to leave Ashdown.

Only in 1957 and 1958, after a house for my grandfather had been built on the newly acquired land at a cost of £2,200 did the business show a deficit, but even then this never exceeded £900.

The amounts that my grandfather and father each allowed themselves for general living expenses were always extremely modest. These never reached fifty per cent of the average wage for a manual worker in the U.K. and were often much less. In the years after 1948 my grandfather and grandmother did have an adult daughter, Ivy, who worked as a secretary in a local business, living with them in the upstairs of the house and she no doubt contributed to the family budget. But, although my mother worked in her father's accountancy office from her marriage in 1941 until 1946, the arrival of four children meant that only the family allowance supplemented what my parents had to live on in the downstairs rooms of the property during the final twelve years of the tenancy.

It was, though, a way of life in which it was possible to live very cheaply indeed. The rent for the house, which after 1941 was shared between the two family groups, was a mere £15 5s 10d for the whole year in 1941 and remained more or less at this level for the next seventeen years. Moreover, the family always had available a plentiful supply of fresh vegetables, poultry and eggs and, at times, pork, bacon, sausages and rabbit as well. In addition, family members had no electricity or gas bills to pay as neither electricity or gas were ever installed at the property and the only phone calls they ever made were from a public call box some distance away. The business expenses, too, were often very modest. Thus the rental for the holding and outbuildings never exceeded £17 for the year and the wages of the regular worker that the family employed were just £1 a day in 1951 and had only risen to £1 8s 0d by 1958.

Surprisingly, the business remained relatively unaffected by the war years. Both men continued to work the land. There was a little more reliance on pig and rabbit production, but the vegetable rounds carried on much as before and the takings from these grew steadily from £343 4s 6d in 1939 to £754 4s 4d in 1945. However, foreign fruit, which had been purchased from a wholesaler to extend the range of goods sold on the rounds before the war became more difficult to obtain when hostilities began. Thus, there is no evidence of oranges, lemons, bananas or grapefruits being available in 1940, but a small number of oranges was bought in November 1941 and in 1942 150 oranges were purchased for £1 10s 9d. There were two separate purchases of oranges towards the end of 1943, but in the years that followed it seems that both oranges and lemons, though relatively expensive, were more or less freely available. The first bananas, however, were not bought until 1946 or the first grapefruits until

1947. Interestingly, two cases of Canadian apples, presumably from British Columbia, had been purchased as early as March 1945 at a cost of £1 10s 0d.

One positive benefit for the business did occur during the war years. Potato acreage payments were made by the Ministry of Food - £20 12s 6d in 1942, then a similar figure each year until the end of the war, followed by a little less until a final payment of £15 was made in 1950. Between 1955 and 1958 payments went in the opposite direction as the business had to pay the Potato Board £3 each year!

The work on the land was very labour intensive. But some additional power was required right from the outset. For a long time this was supplied by a horse. Of course, the horse had maintenance costs attached to it and in 1939 these amounted to £12 2s 6d. During the year, the horse would have to have an average of nine sets of front shoes and seven sets of back ones. A complete set of shoes in 1939 cost 8s 0d. A new horse was purchased in 1941 at a cost of £35 and this had to be replaced in 1946 by another for £62.

Evidently, one horse was not sufficient to cope with both the work on the land and the vegetable rounds, as in 1944 a petrol powered garden tractor was bought. Even then, the business occasionally needed help from outside with ploughing and cultivating. It is not surprising to find, therefore, that the Ferguson tractor was acquired in 1948 after the last horse went lame. Eventually a full range of accessories and implements was purchased for this, including a trailer, two ploughs, various harrows, a crop sprayer and both a potato planter and potato spinner. This meant that not only was the family able to extend its holding by a further ten acres but also do some contract work for other local smallholders, with whom the accounts show considerable interdependence in relation to both goods and services.

One of the most interesting aspects of the accounts is what they reveal about prices in this period. A hundredweight of coal could be purchased for 2s 8d (13p) in 1939 but had increased in price to 8s 5d (42p) by 1958. In 1939 a man's haircut was 6d (2.5p) and a woman's 9d (4p). The following year a bicycle pump cost 2s 6d (12.5p) and a hot water bottle 7d (3p). In 1946 a chimney sweep's services cost 4s 6d (22.5p) and in 1948 a phone call cost 2d (1p). A self-employed National Insurance stamp cost 6s 2d (31p) in 1948 and remained at this level until 1952 when it was increased to 6s 6d (32.5p). In 1954 ten trailer loads of manure cost just £15. Even as recently as 1958 it was possible to buy six gallons of petrol for £1 8s 1d (£1-41p)! Many of us like to reflect on the 'good old days' but of course these prices do not necessarily seem very favourable when allowance for subsequent inflation has been made.

When the family relinquished the tenancy in 1958 my grandfather was seventy-nine years of age. Even so, he had no appetite for retirement and continued to work with my father on the newly acquired land to the east of Hastings. He finally agreed to draw his old age pension ten years later. Although he never returned to live in his native county he always remained intensely proud of his Wiltshire roots.